To assert that women and cinema have had a tumultuous relationship is an understatement. Both the representation of women on screen and the women who create the images seen in cinema have been the subject of ongoing debates corresponding with the second-wave of feminism. Early (1970s) feminist film theorists attempted to explain these various issues using psychoanalytic theory, which emphasized the phallocentric nature of patriarchal society and the general objectification of women in cinema. This branch of film theory refers to psychological processes such as fetishistic scopophilia and voyeurism, as well as alluding to an all-encompassing patriarchal gaze. To these theorists, women serve as objects for sex, pleasure, displeasure, punishment, and spectacle. The feminist phenomenological approach that followed attempted to fill in the gaps that psychoanalysis left – such as accounting for the actual female experience, and refusing to see women as static objects on screen. Women were now figures subject to affect-percept-action images as any other figure on screen would be. Using a Hegelian model of dialectics in regards to feminist film theory, psychoanalytic theory would be the thesis, phenomenology would the anti-thesis, but what would be the synthesis? Some theorists point to a methodological approach as a possible synthesis, and drawing from both psychoanalytic and phenomenological concepts are able to draw positive enforcement from mimetic representation. The only problem with this approach, however, is that it still uses the same ‘vocabulary’ as the dominant hegemony. To truly
start-fresh feminist film theorists need to negate the old methods of representation entirely. For the discussion of these concepts, this paper will examine Mervyn LeRoy’s *Gold Diggers* from 1933, Vera Chytilova’s *Daises* of 1966, and Claire Denis’ *Beau Travail* of 1999, briefly.

Feminist psychoanalytic film theory became the dominant discourse after Laura Mulvey published her highly influential “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in 1975, which shook the foundation upon which the female construction in film stood until that time. The presentation of women on screen as dualistic and binary creatures such as virgin/whore, femme-fetal/saint, were now questioned explicitly. Mulvey sets out in the introduction of the article to dispel some of the “magic” behind the image of females that worked so aptly in films of the past. In the article Mulvey boldly asserts: “The paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world” (Mulvey, 6). In this way, the subjugation and objectification of women as inferior objects was in some ways necessary to the functioning of men as superior subjects. Using Charles Sanders Peirce’s terminology, according to Mulvey, women onscreen act as an index to castration, pleasure, pain, mother, daughter, virgin, and whore, among others. According to Mulvey, men are granted with the illusion of being the active bearers of the gaze, while women are passive objects of the gaze. Using this principle Mulvey sets up two important concepts which men use to disavow their castration anxiety onscreen: the first is fetishistic scopophilia in which the female star is hyper-glamorized, the second is sadistic voyeurism, in which the female character’s story ends in punishment or forgiveness. While we can look to any
modern horror movie for an example of sadistic voyeurism, fetishistic scopophilia is arguably more commonly incorporated.

Here we can look at LeRoy’s *Gold Diggers* for examples of this process. Every female character on screen both minor and major are hyper glamorized. Through use of elaborate costumes, extensive sets, and extravagant musical numbers, the women are presented as unattainable objects of desire. The subject matter of several of the musical numbers such as “Petting in the Park” can be considered fetishistic scopophilia, in that it glamorizes sexual interactions between men and women. These concepts are seen throughout the film, however, in one particularly glaring scene, the opening number “We’re in the Money”, ostentatious objects such as money, gold, diamonds, massive sets and other extravagant props are juxtaposed against the women walking out in a line. The women in this example are deliberately placed in the same realm of hyper-glamorized attraction as money and gold are. The women are an obvious attraction within the film – a reason to go see the film, something that draws and holds an audience’s attention, according to Eisenstein’s definition. Fetishistic scopophilia, in fact, promotes the idea of women being a filmic attraction, in that they are idealized and conceptualized. This film promotes can be seen as an example of women onscreen being phallic substitutes through hyper-glamorization and through fetishistic scopophilia.

However influential Mulvey’s article was, psychoanalytic theory in regards to feminism had a limit to how far it could go. According to Shohini Chaudhuri, who summarizes the work of Theresa de Lauretis, psychoanalytic theory “traps feminist thinking within a conceptual opposition between man and woman, which is already embedded within patriarchal society and its discourses” (Chadhuri 64). Essentially the
problem with psychoanalysis in regards to analyzing films from a feminist perspective is that women are still defined in opposition to man: “Woman as Other from Man” (Chadhuri 64). Again we can look at Gold Diggers for examples of this process. For example, when Carol and Trixie play a series of courting-game tricks on Brad’s wealthy uncles, they have a power over them through their hyper-glamorization, but only insofar as they are defined against the men. Their tricks can only go so far before they begin to feel guilty, and eventually are forgiven for their deceits.

Psychoanalytic theory is still based on sexual difference, and in other words is binary, and as such is incapable of addressing the “complex and contradictory relation of women to Woman” (Chadhuri 64) – Woman, capitalized being the fictional construction of women onscreen. Claire Johnston, another psychoanalytic film theorist argued in her paper “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema” from 1975, that for films to break the phallocentric mold, it is not enough to simply discuss the representation of reality, but in order for cinema to be revolutionary it must challenge depictions of reality. To understand this concept, we can turn to Chytilova’s Daisies: The influential avant-garde film does not look to discuss representations of reality, rather the film challenges these representations head on, through nonsensical situations, realistic situations turned ridiculous, and a general unwillingness of the two Maries to conform to social norms. There are similar scenes in both Daisies and Gold Diggers such as dining scenes: the two Maries on a few occasions blatantly use men to get free meals as they do in Gold Diggers, but then take them along on a wild ride through their spontaneously constructed world. The difference between the films is that these women do not entertain the fantasies
of the men, they have their own agenda altogether, even if it is a nonsensical and erratic one. The only reason the two Maries even deal with men at all is in relation to food.

Following the wave of psychoanalytic film analysis, phenomenology became a dominant discourse when discussing filmic themes. Elena Del Rio, a Deleuzian phenomenological film theorist, begins where she felt Laura Mulvey left off in the 70’s and 80’s with psychoanalysis. From a feminist phenomenological standpoint, psychoanalysis has many gaps still needing explanation. For one, “the body is not so much a material entity in itself as it is a written and spoken sign” (Del Rio, 113), as it is in psychoanalytic film theory. However, such an analysis created an imbalance as the female experience was thus “practically irrelevant [in] status” (Del Rio 113). Psychoanalytic theory ignored the female experience, and passed it off as little more than a patriarchal construction. The problem with the psychoanalytic approach was it assumed the female to be a static object, incapable of change and dynamism, ignoring the female experience entirely. Phenomenology argues that the body is never in a fixed status, it is changing and dynamic, constantly shaped by new experiences and situations. A fetishized body, as Del Rio suggests, is then a “static and fixed form” one which “never achieves a final state of formal unity” (Del Rio 114). This is not to say that a phenomenological feminist approach then ignores the phallocentric nature of film and, indeed, society in general, but rather seeks to read the female body as “engaged in possibilities of action and meaning in addition to…those stipulated by culture” (Del Rio, 114). Thus, through a phenomenological feminist approach the “female body is always more than just the fetishized construct of the male gaze” (Del Rio 114). This kind of feminist
phenomenological reading to women on screen truly is the antithesis to the psychoanalytic thesis as it dives in where psychoanalysis left off, and appropriates and rejects psychoanalysis where necessary.

Again, using this approach, we can examine the works of *Gold Diggers* and *Daises*. In LeRoy’s film, the female experience is not merely a matter of fetishistic scopophilia, but it is a film which explores the ingenuity and cunningness of this particular group of women who use the resources at their disposal – including their fetishized bodies – to make the best of their situations. These are women who at the beginning of the film are ‘suffering’ due to the poor economic situation leaving them without jobs, money or food. These women react in ways only they would be able to. This is due to the affection-image to action-image transfers, unique to their own situations. This transfer is due to the movement-image, to appropriate Gilles Deleuze’s film theory, which is composed of perception and affection-images making way for new action-images. In every situation a new movement-image is possible due to unique perception and affection-images unique to the individual. The women are not fixed objects but in a perpetual state of change and dynamism due to their interactions with the movement-image.

This concept is true as well to the Maries in *Daises*, who not only react to situations in their own unique way, but also purposefully create the very situations they are in to begin with. This is to say, that the two Marie’s are not passive individuals, they purposefully put themselves in certain situations whether awkward, spontaneous, or potentially dangerous merely for the joy of it; the two Maries are in constant search of new movement-images; the two Marie’s put themselves into situations which they do not
know the outcome, nor do they care, even if the result is “bad” they go on to create more movement-images. To this Del Rio argues: “No matter the gender of the bodies concerned, or the combination thereof, the body only exists in relation, which is to say performance” (Del Rio 116). According to this approach, in the basest sense, phenomenology does not discriminate against gender, but rather embraces sexual difference as new means of movement-percept-affect-action images.

Alison Butler breaks from both psychoanalysis and phenomenology momentarily by discussing film theory through a methodological approach. In her book on Women’s cinema, she opens the discussion by addressing the problem in labeling the genre:

Women’s cinema is a notoriously difficult concept to define. It suggests, without clarity, films that might be made by, address to, or concerned with women, or all three. It is neither a genre nor a movement in film history, it has no single lineage of its own, no national boundaries, no filmic or aesthetic specificity, but traverses and negotiates cinematic and cultural traditions and critical and political debates. (Butler 1)

Despite the variety and vastness of women’s cinema, it is nevertheless widely considered to be a “minor” cinema in and of itself. Using Deleuze and Felix Guatteri’s notions of minor literature, Butler expands the definition of women’s cinema. A minor cinema or literature is made by individuals who have been displaced, dispossessed and deterritorialised (Butler). To be termed “minor” is to be outside of dominant hegemonic forces; it comes from a marginalized group but is “written, not in a minor language, but in a major one” (Butler 22). This is to say that women’s cinema is “written” in the dominant language – with the same codes, signs, signifiers, and indices as major (patriarchal) cinema. Butler argues, however, that to be deemed a minor cinema is actually a good thing: “To call women’s cinema a minor cinema, then, is to free it from
the binarisms (popular/elitist, avant-garde/mainstream, positive/negative) which result from imagining it as a parallel or oppositional cinema” (Butler 22). Butler’s model is one that negates the previous codes discussed.

To discuss women’s film in a methodological approach we can look at Claire Denis’ film from 1999 Beau Travail. In the film, hegemonic structures such as gender difference are all but excluded. An exploration of power is present but it is explored via the body, affect-image and emotion, rather than politically or verbally motivated. Beau Travail, and in fact many films by Denis are considered minor cinema, in that they often deal with subject matter outside dominant hierarchical modes. Laura Marks discusses the concept of mimesis in her book The Skin of the Film and argues that mimesis “shifts the hierarchical relationship between subject and object” (Marks 141), and that it is “an immanent way of being in the world, whereby the subject comes into being not through abstraction from the world but compassionate involvement with it” (Marks 141). Moving back to Beau Travail we can see mimesis at work in the film, in that the subject matter concerns issues normally regarded as masculine, and indeed, uses very few females at all in the film – however, as previously stated, via mimesis and the status of the film as minor, Denis is able to renegotiate these social constructs. Again, we can look at Daises here, in that the film also negotiates through mimesis and minor cinema constructs but is able to use these to its advantage. Several scenes, again looking at the dining scenes with older men, are set up using mimesis – similar situations as seen in mainstream films such as Gold Diggers, but then goes on to negate these social stereotypes of how a woman should act or feel in the situation.
Moving forward, feminist film theory will need to develop a conglomerate theory, one which acknowledges psychoanalytic concepts such as phallocentrism and fetishistic scopophilia as partially inherent to a patriarchal society but does not accept this is the end all of theory. Filling in the gaps by appropriating Deluzian and phenomenological pursuits, the female experience will not be entirely ignored as the psychoanalytic approach tended to do whether consciously or not, and will look at women on screen as a source of unique experiences with their own movement-images. We can then place this into the heading of minor cinema which, through use of mimetic representation, is actually empowering to women’s cinema in general as they are able to appropriate and work within dominant hegemony without being labeled with binaries. The new theory is free from harsh dualisms, appropriates where necessary, and while not offering a grand synthesis, finds in negation a tentative new way of viewing women’s cinema, by making full use of its “minor” status.
Works Cited:


Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Index, Icon, Symbol*. 1867.